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On Patrick Todd, Ronald Wallace, and Melinda Mueller

Rick Robbins

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real poetry, the music of a living language doing the job of mending the spirit, of teaching by enchanting.

Sam Hamill

Fire in the Bushes

Patrick Todd

Clearwater

P.O. Box 8594

Missoula, Montana 59801

\$3.50, paper

If every poem is of necessity a recollection, then Todd's technique goes a long way toward shortening that gap between what is seen and its notation. This is not to suggest that he opposes himself to memory; rather, he seems more interested in the crystallization of it within an instant, in realizing in the poem the meeting point of a thousand crossed lines:

COUNTRY WEDDING

All nervous in country lace the bride
rode down the mountain with her father . . .
wagon reins springing easy in the early sun
Fifty mums banked the church walls white
Thick cream candles
The groom sat mute for the stiff picture
Both hands closed big as hammers

Women owned this time round the holy cake
The old fathers . . . faces puffed red
from years of whiskey and the blazing wheat
waited out weddings like a funeral
Even the sleepy minister hated circles
of screaming kids and spotted
a yellow toy he'd love to crush

Gone the bride in white lace
whose wedding moon lit up a long lazy s
of geese over McGuinnigan's pond

Now the farmers' sons grow mean in town
a boy beat a hole in a boxcar
with a hundred pound furnace iron
Gone . . . twenty horses steaming in the barn

Partly because of the mental shorthand going on, the poems read like waking visions. Partly because they compress disparate elements into a moment where their meanings cohere, these visions have a redemptive quality about them. The baggage of memory finds release. Where the spontaneity of this process is most in doubt, the poems seem less successful, less acts of arrival. But when this process is working, it does so in a whirlwind of associations that seem present all at once, as here, in the last section of "Furnace Tenders":

Hook up your coat anywhere
in the zinc leach . . .
The next morning it hangs in shreds
Thirty years in the roasters
and dry rasping
breaks in the lungs
Some get milk leg
The skin bags paste white and men sit out
half their shifts on the benches
One guy . . . ten kids . . .
endless payments
and pictures of Christ
all over his house . . . pushes the bar
into the face of a routine
orange blast and forgets
Forgets he grabbed the guard loop
and his hand's exposed
Caught between
the bar and a steel beam
the bones mash like a bag of peanuts
Morley dies and the guy without
a hand gets his soft job

Homelessness runs through many, if not most, of these poems. On countless freights headed anywhere, in a soup line or at a midnight mission in some large city, Todd presents the human and the saintly aspects of what would be called elsewhere "the failed lives." Not surprisingly, it is through this that he becomes better acquainted—simultaneously—with what has failed in him, and what survives. And it is through this clarified sense of self that the poems' speaker is enabled to speak and observe more confidently, surer of his

direction. Perhaps it is this that figures more in the redemptive quality the poems convey. A rootlessness become rooted, the images of a life given form and reference. Here is the last poem in the collection:

SAINT FRANCIS

At dusk mile long clouds
stream orange above the sun going down
Purple drifts over the mountains
far as the sea
After all is said and done . . .
all passion for wives
and lovers gone
. . . no one . . . not even a room this time
Only this walk along the road
. . . yellow trees . . . sky . . .
the bright cold grass
Tonight under giant ponderosa

Slow blue flames rise
from blackberries
and the whole bush flares up blazing white
On the climb like this to La Verna
a hundred birds
swarmed Saint Francis
The next morning Leo peeked
around the secret hut

to see his brother soar
high as the trees
High in the Sistine Chapel
fury of brushes lifted God and creation
on the ceiling In the basement
Michelangelo chiseled
ripples of silk in marble
There's no holy word for compulsion
to be alone In the far woods
only this steady light gleaming
in oil of the burro's eye

Installing the Bees

Ronald Wallace

Chowder Chapbooks

2858 Kingston Dr.

Madison, Wisconsin 53713

\$2.00, paper

The joy of this collection is that it allows. At a time when the meaning of nearly everything is threatened, Wallace has undertaken, often in elaborate and playful ways, to recover that which gives life to a thing. The vehicle is the praise; the approach, always simple and imaginative:

the vines with their
green hair
sing to the fall air
tomatoes, tomatoes.

or:

You lift your white hands
to your eyes, waxen, honeyed,
pale lilies, mums, the dead man's
flowers, a thousand bees buzzing
in your wrists.

Imagistically, anything is possible. Yet it is the solid base created by diction, an unassuming tone, that convinces a reader that everything has been told correctly, that everything in these poems is in its proper place. In the last stanza of "Restoring the Moon," Wallace describes a situation which could be taken metaphorically to be his stance throughout the book:

You land on the moon.
It is not what it seems. Just rocks and dust.
Still, they are counting on you.
You reach in your pockets. Luckily, you've brought
your plums, stones, kisses, and hooks
with you. You take them out. You get to work.

With the fewest of tools, a world is built again. And we can count on Wallace to give us a world where things are alive, and where their meaning matters.

Private Gallery
Melinda Mueller
The Seal Press
Seattle, Washington
\$3.00, paper

Here, too, the poems are celebrations, yet Mueller seems less interested in the world for its own sake than in an inner life nurtured and rectified by that world being correctly observed:

The landscape's cargo is stone, thatch, a castle keep,
lean trees twisted like cable, the deep sediment of legend.

The wind my bones have dreamt of rises. Westward,
the Cliffs of Moher are a tall prow. Miles inland, I hoist sail.

That these poems often respond to, or are triggered by, a particular thing—be it a place, a painting, a quotation—suggests the poet's obsession with relationship. Wherever she finds herself, she finds occasion for self-inventory:

Beneath me, the ground
surrenders. The only remedies
are seasonal, as a forest
is cured of its leaves each fall.
Already the whispers of betrayal
are rising. I see how resolute
forgiveness has to be.

In the best of these poems there is a serious attempt to see clearly, both inside and out. Never mere confessions, the poems concern themselves with truthfully announcing, always quietly, what seems to be the case. What we glean as readers are example, visits with clarity. And, as so often happens with words that strike deeply, we become acquainted with the awesomeness of things. Here is the last section of the title poem:

ILLUSTRATION FROM A FAIRY TALE

The woman who knew the story's real ending
was the Wicked Stepmother,
which is how she earned the title Wicked.

Seeing her approach the priest leapt
 for the hedge, the king rubbed the stones
 of his parapet until his palms were raw.
 Only the tinker and the woman peddling needles,
 who lived by the road and not by the story,
 tipped their caps or nodded. She has come
 from her circular room, the dried roots,
 the brews of tansy and St. John's wort.
 The apples she carries are poisonous
 because she has placed them in her basket
 upside down. One for each of us.

Rick Robbins

BOOKS RECEIVED

- Cleared for Landing*, Ann Darr, poems, Dryad Press, \$3.95.
Corroboree, Kenneth Gangani, prose, Assembling Press, \$2.95.
The Eggplant and Other Absurdities, Duane Ackerson, poems, Confluence Press.
50 Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process, Alberta T. Turner, ed., anthology, Longman Press, \$12.50, hardback.
Fire in the Bushes, Patrick Todd, poems, Clearwater, \$3.50.
A Full Heart, Edward Field, poems, Horizon Press, \$7.95, hardback.
Gillnets, Samuel Green, poems, Cold Mountain Press, no price listed.
Highland Station, Roland Tharp, poems, Poetry Texas Chapbooks, no price listed.
Installing the Bees, Ronald Wallace, poems, Chowder Chapbooks, \$2.00.
Laughing Past History, Rhoda Gelfond, poems, Copper Beech Press, \$3.50.
Looking Up, Christopher Buckley, poem, Greenhouse Review Press, no price listed.
The Man Who Shook Hands, Diane Wakoski, poems, Doubleday, \$3.95.
The Night Traveler, Mary Oliver, poems, Bits Press, no price, letter-pressed.
On the Road to Sleeping Child Hotsprings, Roger Dunsmore, poems, Pulp Press, \$3.00.
The Romantic Abstract of the Mythical Agon, Harrison Fisher, poems, Window Press, \$1.75.
Songs for a Hometown Boy, Mark Vinz, poems, Solo Press, no price listed.
Three, Richard Dokey, stories, Fiction Texas, no price listed.
Topographics, Margaret Condon, poems, Lame Johnny Press, \$2.50.

MAGAZINES RECEIVED

- The Agni Review* (No. 8), David Ghitelman and Askold Melnyczuk, eds., P.O. Box 663, Cranford, NJ 07016. \$1.50 each.